



---

Young Adult Literature: Defending YA Literature: Voices of Students

Author(s): Chris Crowe

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 92, No. 1, Shakespeare for a New Age (Sep., 2002), pp. 114-118

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/821969>

Accessed: 04/12/2012 12:13

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The English Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Young Adult Literature

CHRIS CROWE, EDITOR

## DEFENDING YA LITERATURE: VOICES OF STUDENTS

At the beginning of this school year, I want to promote novels and nonfiction written specifically for teenagers. If you teach junior high or high school English, I hope you'll consider using some good young adult books in your classes this year. I could go into all the reasons why you should incorporate YA literature into your curriculum, regardless of the level you teach, but I don't have to. The students in my young adult literature course have already made a great case for YA literature, so all I have to do is step out of the way and let you read what they have to say in defense of the field.

What follows is a collection of excerpts from a recent virtual class discussion my students had on our course listserv. These are bright kids, mostly senior English majors, about half of whom are planning to teach English some day. Their virtual discussion began with Chris Crutcher's *Running Loose*, and then Jami Lee changed the focus of the conversation to a larger issue in the field. I think you'll find their voices and their logic convincing.

**Jami Lee:** I don't mean to detract from Ben's discussion about *Running Loose*, but I have another issue for you to think about: If you had to defend YA literature, would you do it? Or could you do it?

I had a little experience the other day: I took *Running Loose* to work, and my manager saw it sitting on the counter. She picked it up, read the back cover, and immediately started laughing. She asked me, as an English major, if this was the kind of stuff I was studying. I explained I was in an adolescent literature class, and I admit that I was a bit embarrassed. I mean I'm supposed to be reading Shakespeare, Whitman, and Eliot, right? Well, I didn't defend YA literature like I wanted to right then, but

it gave me something to think about: Do I really want to defend YA literature, and how can I justify it to those who have never read it before?

I didn't read these types of books when I was a teen. I was taught by my parents and my English teachers to indulge myself in the classics, literature that had deeper and more meaningful insights on life. Now I know that YA lit does provide meaning for teens. These books aren't just stories about secret crushes and high school sports; they deal with much larger issues that almost all teens have to deal with in some way or another. I think that teens should read books that provide meaning for their lives right then at that moment. Don't get me wrong, I think *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Jungle* are brilliant works, but what are teenagers going to do with the lessons of adultery and the imagery of disgusting meat factories at a time when other issues such as popularity, gangs, sex, and drugs are the most prominent things on their minds?

Some adults don't agree with a lot of the YA lit that's out there, but I think it gives teens a chance to see how other people are coping with similar problems they are dealing with themselves. You have to admit that bringing up sensitive issues to your parents or teachers was sometimes hard and embarrassing. Why not give teens a book that deals with the issue and then talk about it? I wish someone would have done that with me.

I guess that's how I would defend and justify YA lit. I'm curious to hear what everyone else has to say.

**Christy:** In response to the justification question, I just want to point out that I think it is really funny that we have to justify reading YA lit instead of classics, yet no one thinks to justify reading things like John Grisham's works or Tom Clancy's. I think that there is a lot more good to be found in the YA lit. The adult novels that are so popular, much as I love them, don't seem to have anything to learn in them; they are just good thrilling stories, nothing but entertainment (this doesn't go for all, of course, but many). I think in all the classics there are things to be gleaned. There is something in them that can make your life better if you so choose, and I find that most of the YA lit I have read does the same thing far better than anything I have read by John Grisham. Yet we must continue to defend our reading of "children's" books. Go figure.

**Jessie:** I've been thinking a lot about the value of YA literature since this class started in

January. I'm not a teaching major, but it sounded like a cool class so I decided to take it. Boy am I glad I did. When I was growing up I read a mixture of classics, adult fiction, and YA books. The YA books were often some of my favorites, but when I went to college I gave most of mine away to my mom. Now I wish I hadn't done that. I feel that YA literature has value for both its intended audience and for adults. There's the whole point of view that it is a good way to discuss teen issues, the books are generally positive and they teach a lesson, and most are just plain fun to read.

Two other reasons why I think YA literature is important: First, while not being as challenging as many "classics," there are many YA books that offer quality writing and thought provoking plots. I think it is good to expose teens to good writing that they won't have to slog through like *War and Peace*. The books Dr. Crowe has chosen for the class are all good examples of the quality and variety that are out there. My second reason for reading YA literature is that it shows teenagers that their experiences have value. I feel that this is one of the most important reasons to have literature for and about young adults. One of the things I remember about being a teenager was the feeling that I thought I was mature, but no one else seemed to think so. (I probably really wasn't, but everyone has that illusion.) YA literature can provide a feeling that teenagers have power and can handle a variety of situations.

**Kelley:** When I signed up for the class, I was highly skeptical that I would enjoy the class or take much of what I learned with me into the teaching world. The only YA lit I could remember were Nancy Drew books and a couple cheap thrillers designed for middle school audiences. As soon as I could read beyond children's books, my parents and teachers pushed me toward the classics. I was probably the only fifth grader in my elementary school to devour *Pride and Prejudice*. Frankly, I thought that I would just take this class, push the whole YA lit canon aside, and only use the classics in my own teaching. I've always thought of YA novels as dumbed-down books that didn't merit much recognition.

I've had a change of heart. Instead of just reading about situations and people that are far removed from me, I've found in some of the books that we've read situations and emotions and characters that touch on the very experience of being an adolescent, and in some cases, just being a human

being. I was riveted by Shackleton's story [Jennifer Armstrong's *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World*] and his crew's dedication and compassion. When I read *Out of the Dust*, I found one awesome piece of literature. I'm still impressed by Virginia Euwer Wolff's form and the variety of themes in *Make Lemonade*. Sometimes I even start to dissect the novels we're reading according to post-modernist theories, which I used to think only the Toni Morrison geniuses of our day could write. Some of these writers are absolutely incredible, and they touch on humanity and the adolescent experience so incredibly well.

There is a whole lot of YA trash out there—right now, I'm reading a sappy romance/death novel, and it is living up to the stereotype that I've long held about overly dramatic, lame YA fiction. And I still feel kind of embarrassed when I check ten juvenile fiction books out of the library—I always feel like I should explain to the librarian that it's for a class. But then I take the books home, and I learn something. And I think about how much more I could have learned if I had more exposure to these books in middle and high school. I still believe that a classical literary background is essential, but I think that some of these books are braver and much more applicable than a far-removed classic.

**Heidi:** I agree wholeheartedly with your response, Kelly. Except I didn't read all the classics that you read in fifth grade. When I was younger, my mom was constantly buying us books for each popular series that had come out. I remember reading just about every Baby-sitters Club book I could, and loving the little series about Peanut Butter & Jelly. I also loved reading my mom's books: Trixie Beldon, The Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew. By about seventh grade, I completely stopped reading anything that might be called young adult, and I got completely hooked on Tolkein, Star Wars, you know.

"So, when I first started this class, I was not sure what kinds of books to expect that we'd read, since I really hadn't read too many young adult books as a teen. And I'll admit that I, too, got a little embarrassed that I was purchasing so many kid books from the bookstore. However, I'm so glad that I've been taking this class—there are many important lessons to be found in each of the YA books I've read, and I think they would hit home to more teenagers than probably Tom Clancy or Timothy Zahn would. In defense of YA literature, I think it is definitely worth our time as teachers to read so that we

know just one more way that we might be able to someday help or influence our students. Who knows? Maybe that one book we might recommend to somebody would change her life, and give her hope that she can keep on living.

**Melanie:** I just wanted to respond to Kelly and Heidi. I don't think that either of you should feel dumb or embarrassed for buying YA books. I think that by reading YA books, and by buying them, you show that you have a variety of interests and you're not just interested in the high-brow classics. Personally, I prefer YA books to classics. They are filled with life and humor and memories. While I give the classics the merit they deserve, reading YA fills me with something that I couldn't get out of reading just the classics. I don't think that people in the bookstore look down on you when you buy YA books. The truth is, most of the people who work in bookstores don't read. They're probably more impressed that you do read. Even if it is YA! I hope that helps ease your insecurities.

**Cindy:** I agree that there's no reason why "classics" should be considered any more valid or valuable than YA books. The fact of the matter is, all types of books have good and bad examples. Seldom can you take an entire genre or grouping and make a broad judgment about every book in that category. I've read some great YA books, and I've read some awful ones. I'm a big fan of fantasy books as well, and there's a huge pile of fantasy trash out there. If you know where to look, though, there's also some great stuff. And I believe fantasy books, good ones, have a great deal of value. People often raise their eyebrows when I start defending fantasy novels. I just ignore them. Same thing for YA literature: there will be those who wrinkle their noses at it, but don't worry. There's plenty of value in reading a good book for teens.

**Diana:** I have been reading your responses to defending YA lit. I agree with most everything stated. I think YA literature is a valuable asset to a young adult. These books are true literature. I like them because they teach what we should value. Not only young adults, but adults of all ages should read these books. Values aren't subject to age, they are subject to the human race. Values are universal, good ones are anyway, and YA literature teaches some of these values. YA lit asks the audience to question what their society is and see if they agree. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *The Giver* and many others teach us this. What does my commu-

nity say about race? Do I agree? What does my community say about trust and family and other things? Do I agree? Above all, YA lit teaches us to trust ourselves and to make decisions for ourselves. You live and you learn.

What are you going to do when you are a teacher (if you are a teaching major) and you want to teach literature but your students are in ninth grade, just barely fourteen? Do you think these kids can swallow *The Scarlet Letter*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Crucible*, *The Great Gatsby*? Of course they could probably swallow it with your help, but when I was that age, I don't think that would have interested me. For the longest time, I was mad at my sophomore English teacher for making me read dumb books, including *The Chocolate War*, because I thought I was being cheated from reading the classics. Between my sophomore year and junior year I moved from Ohio to Colorado and realized that my peers in Colorado were reading the American lit classics, while I was reading Robert Cormier. Back then I felt betrayed, but now I realize that I was being taught differently, probably more at my level.

Well, that's what I have to say in defense of YA lit.

### Student Discoveries: New or Overlooked YA Books Worth Reading

The following book recommendations have been written by a high school student (Carrie Crowe) and university students:

*Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging*, Louise Rennison (HarperCollins, 2000). Fourteen-year-old Georgia Nicholson is a British girl who is becoming more curious about the world of women. She wants to become more of a woman herself and decides that learning how to kiss from a complete stranger is the way to do it. This novel is hilarious; it made me laugh out loud. It is a fun, very creative story. I recommend this book to anyone, especially girls, who love laughing out loud about stupid things. (Carrie Crowe)

*The Arm of the Starfish*, Madeleine L'Engle (Ariel Books, 1965). This novel moved me more than any of L'Engle's others. It's the story of Adam Eddington, a marine biology student whose summer job on an island off the coast of Portugal lands him in the middle of a power struggle between two opposing groups. The themes of good and evil, trusting self and trusting others, forgiveness, healing, and



loving one's enemies really struck a chord with me. I have always felt that Madeline L'Engle's books taught important values, and I've enjoyed them because her stories are light fantasy, making them appeal to a wide range of readers. Because this book deals with some serious issues, I don't recommend it for younger readers, but I think that most young adults could benefit from it; it is well written with a powerful and stirring message. (Christy Smith)

*Jackaroo*, Cynthia Voigt (Atheneum Books, 1985). Beyond being a great adventure and just barely a romance, *Jackaroo* asks what it means to be a hero and explores how knowledge can be both a gift and a curse. Gwyn, becoming increasingly isolated from her society, eventually has to find a new place, somewhere between the Lords' world and the People's. The beauty of the book is in her realization that there is more to heroism than glory, that we rule our own destinies. Gwyn will appeal to teenage girls because of her strength and character, and how she takes control of her life. It's about responsibility and growing up, but it never preaches. It just tells a fabulous story. (Jeanna Mason)

*Make Lemonade*, Virginia Euwer Wolff (Scholastic, 1994). Written in a sort of "free verse," this book is full of incredible images and difficult questions. It is beautiful and compelling. Beautiful because of the message—trite but true—that life is what we make it; compelling because it took a dead cliché (when life gives you lemons) and brought it to life, turning the truth in that expression into a story with meaning. Though Jolly is constantly preached at, the reader isn't. It's a great story for teenage girls who are facing questions of where to go in life, or wondering where they *can* go. (Jeanna Mason)

*Monster*, Walter Dean Myers (HarperCollins, 1999). Sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon is on trial for a murder he did not commit, and this is his story. Told through a movie script and journal entries, this is a moving story about young kids caught up in a bad world. Steve is an endearing character who is trying to figure out who he is and why people are calling him a monster. Although I finished this novel a week ago, I find that I am still thinking about it. This is a great book for young adults and adults. It deals with harsh, hard realities and opens readers' eyes to a whole new world a lot of them have never encountered before. (Katie Hutchison)

*Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher (Putnam, 1994). In this interesting and tactful book, Mary Pipher shares the situations of her teenage female

clients and shows why living in today's society can be difficult for many of them. Reading her book has taught me more about myself and about life. I highly recommend this book to all female teens and their parents. (Carrie Crowe)

*Speak*, Laurie Halse Anderson (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999). Melinda is a lonely ninth-grade girl. The summer before she started high school, the people she had thought were her friends ditched her because she called the cops to break up a party she was at with her friends. Ever since the party, no one will talk to her, and no one will even listen to her reasons for calling the police. She is invisible to everyone in school. Readers will be able to relate to Melinda's feelings and the struggles she goes through in this story. I got hooked on this book and loved it. It will probably be more popular with girls than with guys. (Carrie Crowe)

*Stargirl*, Jerry Spinelli (Knopf, 2000). Stargirl Caraway is a unique high school student who is not afraid to be herself, even after she realizes that being herself is not acceptable in her school. I loved the character of Stargirl because she is the kind of person we all want to be around. Leo, the sixteen-year-old narrator of this story, is fascinated with Stargirl and the way she acts, and the two become friends—until Leo lets peer pressure rule his life. This was an enjoyable book, one that's closely tied to some of the real aspects of high school life. Teenage girls, and maybe even some boys, will enjoy this novel. (Carrie Crowe)

*Toning the Sweep*, Angela Johnson (Orchard Books, 1993). Readers will relate to the life and heritage of Emily, a fourteen-year-old girl visiting her grandmama Ola for the last time in the desert of California. The heartache, love, and happiness that Emily experiences while learning about her family's history are powerfully portrayed. Important issues such as death and cancer are discussed in realistic ways, yet Johnson leaves her readers with hope because Emily and her mother finally learn how to "tone the sweep" for Ola's beloved husband, who died when Emily's mother was also fourteen. Even though everyone has trials, the author emphasizes that people who look for things to be happy about and live for are those for whom life will hold the most meaning. This book is a keeper. (Heidi Cahoon)

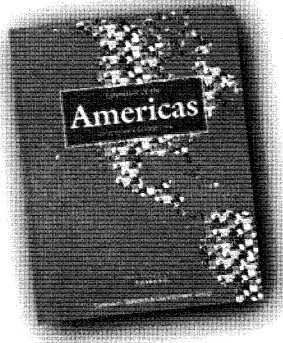
*A Walk to Remember*, Nicholas Sparks (Warner Books, 2000). Landon Carter is student body president and generally a pretty popular kid at school; he also comes from a wealthy family. Jamie

is the exact opposite. She has no friends at school, her father is a minister at the local church, and her family doesn't have much money. During the story, though, Landon sees through all that and begins to fall in love with Jamie. I loved this book and could not put it down until I had finished it. It's the "opposites attract" type of book that many teenage girls love to read. (Carrie Crowe)

**Note:**

If you're working with teenagers and books, don't overlook this year's Teen Read Week, October 13–19, 2002. For helpful and interesting information about teens and reading, and for ideas for integrating Teen Read Week into your classes, go to <http://www.ala.org/teenread/>

*Literature of the Americas*




*American Literature*


From the Caribbean to Hawaii, Canada to Chile,

*Literature of the Americas* connects your students to the people who work, play, hope and dream—people like ourselves—throughout the Americas.

Edited by Lanning Lee and George Drick  
*Performance English High School Series* ©2001

Published by the  
 Curriculum Research & Development Group

[www.hawaii.edu/crdg/](http://www.hawaii.edu/crdg/) Phone: 800-799-8111



*America's Finest Educational Book Distributor*

**BMI** is your best source for

**Paperbacks**  
From all publishers - Grades K-12

**Teacher's Guides**  
From Novel-Ties & Novel Units

**BMI Bound Books**  
Unconditionally Guaranteed

**Audio-Visuals**  
Cassettes, Book and Cassettes, Videos

**Books for the Accelerated Reader**

Our complete catalog is just a phone call, fax or e-mail away.

**1-800-222-8100 Phone**  
**1-800-986-9393 Fax**  
[www.bmiedserv.com](http://www.bmiedserv.com)